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The Go Club

Getting lost in the game

by Queena Sook Kim

"*Ai-goo cham-nah*," sighs the middle-aged Korean man sitting next to me. It's a common Korean expression, and presently it means something between "Oh shit" and "Jesus." It's the kind of sigh that takes all the breath his tar-stained lungs can muster.

"What should I do?" he asks himself in Korean. He inhales slowly on a half-gone cigarette. "It looks like I'm dead."

He reaches into a worn wooden bowl and runs his fingers through the smooth glass stones – they make a soft crackling noise. His eyes, however, remain fixed on the 361 intersections, or "points," of the Go board grid in front of him. After a long minute, he takes a black stone between his index and middle finger and makes his move.

His opponent, another Korean man with puffy eyelids, reads him like a book. In half a second, he lays down his white stone to block black's escape.

"*Ai-goo cham-nah*," the middle-aged man sighs again. He takes the last drag of his cigarette and lights another. "What should I do?" he mutters.

And so goes the soundtrack of most of the games played at Na Sung Hanguok Gi Won, Koreatown's oldest Go club.

Go, as it's known in Japan, Baduk in Korea, and Weiqi in its homeland, China, dates back some 4,000 years. Though it contends with backgammon as one of the oldest games played in its original form, it's most often compared to chess. Both are games of battle, but to put two difficult games into one simple analogy: Go stones are to chess pieces as guerrillas are to infantrymen. What's a guerrilla or two in a rice paddy in enemy territory? This attitude, of course, brings an unfortunate end.

Learning to play Go takes only a couple of hours, but learning to play a decent game takes years. Mao Zedong thought so highly of the game that he required his generals to play it. In Japan, the warlords went as far as giving the annual Go champ a Cabinet position. Here in the United States, Go fans, like those in the 1,500-strong American Go Association, believe the game can make you Zen. "A strong player must be prepared to be flexible but resolute," reads the association's Web site. "Like the Eastern martial arts, Go can teach concentration, balance and discipline."

But Go players, regardless of nationality, are mostly men – and Korean women, particularly wives and mothers, think they're full of shit.

"You know the people who play the Baduk," my mother answered disgustedly when I asked her about the game. "They are just the lazy people who like to smoking."

My friend Mia has a more dramatic tale. One day her mom came home to find Mia's dad teaching her and her brother Go. She immediately grabbed the kids by their shirt collars and carried them out of the room. I will not allow you to turn *my* children into Baduk players, she informed her husband. "She wouldn't let us learn," Mia explained, "because Baduk sucks your life away."

So is Go an art or an opiate?

It is a little past 7 on a Saturday night when I walk into the Na Sung Hanguok Gi Won – L.A. Korean Go Club – in a rundown strip mall on Western Avenue. Like a bachelor pad, this place is more about function than aesthetics: a dozen collapsible tables, folding chairs, Go boards and a couple of sickly houseplants. The tables along the windows are full of players contemplatively and competitively drawing stones. In the center of the room, a crowd of men stand watching a game. My presence, however, soon disrupts the scene, and one by one, I feel each of the 60 or so pairs of eyes fall on me, the lone woman.

While most of the men go back to their games, the pack standing in the center give me the kind of hard stares boys give to girls who ignore the proverbial "NO GIRLS ALLOWED" sign and enter the clubhouse. They are in their mid-40s and bear dark tans. In Koreatown, such tans mean one of two things: either they play a lot of golf or they labor outdoors. Their mismatched clothes (dark checked shirts and plaid pants) and soiled Korean baseball caps (reading "Free Life" in neon calligraphy) suggest the latter. There isn't really any exclusionary policy at the club, but seeing that I'm Asian, they know I've disregarded the cultural signposts. Their glares seem to say, Didn't your family teach you any better?



"In this game, if you make a mistake you have to face it. If you have a weakness it comes out here, and you must learn to face it."

Just as I start to squirm, a voice calls out, "You've arrived." It's Choi, a thin man with a long face and a short peppered beard. Choi is the club's Wonjang-neem, which is how Koreans address the head of such establishments. It was the Wonjang-neem's game that the men were watching, and a simple greeting from him is enough to soften the hard stares into curious ones.

"Does she play?" asks a slight, wiry man elbowing his way through the crowd. He is wearing dark slacks and a neatly pressed polo shirt. His jittery manner coupled with his jet-black hair gives the immediate impression of youth, but the wrinkles on his face place him in his late 50s.

The Wonjang-neem explains that I am a reporter doing a story on the club. He also tells him that I speak Korean, but the old man, who won't give me his name, insists on believing that I don't.

"Tell her I want to play with her," he says, motioning to a Go board that happens to be facing the restroom – the door to which is always propped open, so that the men can peep their heads out and even converse while pissing. And so the lesson begins.

The old man shows me how to make "houses." A series of casual passersby – still tucking in their shirts and zipping up their flies – wander over to our game. None of them will give me his name. "Don't mention me, I'm nobody," they say before scurrying away. Nor do they bother to see if I am actually getting it – none except for Suk, who at 30 years of age is the club's youngest regular.

As if to symbolize his relative youth, Suk's the only guy at the club who wears shorts – khaki shorts that show his thick legs. He's got sleepy eyes and a pleasant Korean round face. When Suk's not at the club, he's at USC working on a Ph.D. in economics. He's been away from his home in Seoul for 10 years trying to get this Ph.D. – first at the University of Illinois and then at Emory in Atlanta. Tonight, Suk is the only player at the club who speaks English confidently, and the old man uses him as a translator.

"Ask her why she placed her stone there," the old man orders. I answer in Korean before Suk speaks.

"Tell her she's wasting a turn by putting a stone there. That territory is secure. She needs to stake out new territory," replies the old man. In Go, one unnecessary move can cost you the game. In fact, according to Yasunari Kawabata, the Nobel Prize-winning author of the novel *The Master of Go*, by playing the first stone you have 7 in 10 chances of winning.

Like homesteading in the Old West, placing one stone on an empty part of the board is enough to make it yours, at least provisionally. When it's my turn again, like a good cowgirl, I greedily stake out more ground. Again, the old man stops, this time to ask Suk why I'm not defending my territory – the same territory that was secure two moves ago. "Tell her in Go you must not act too hungry," the old man says.

And here is the most difficult challenge in Go: keeping your territory alive, and knowing when it's dead, or in jeopardy. It's an esoteric balancing act, one fluid motion of staking, building, securing and capturing territory. Understanding the complementary nature of these acts – to put it in the lingo of Eastern pop philosophy, the yin and yang of it – is the key to Go.

With Suk and a six-stone handicap, which means six free moves before the game even gets started, I beat the old man by one (games are usually won by a margin of 1 to 6 stones). My brain is fried, and I complain that after a while the game got so confusing I couldn't figure out what was happening.

"That's the fun of it!" the old man retorts. This gets a laugh from Suk and the Wonjang-neem. "If it wasn't confusing, what would be the point in playing?" he says.

Go may be a confusing game, but it's also what's known as "a game of perfect information." Unlike poker, or Scrabble, there are no hidden data in Go. So that somewhere out there in the ethereal realm of mathematical game theory, there exists a perfect way to play. In Go lore, the pursuit of this "perfect play" is legendary, and at the club it's what makes the minutes dissolve into hours and hours into days. Chances are that there will be at least two men laying stones as the sun rises.

"Never closes," says the Wonjang-neem of the Na Sung Hangook Gi Won, the city's only 24-7 Go club.

It's a late weekday afternoon, and the Wonjang-neem is leaning against the front counter, looking out the windows at another cloudy day. On the counter sit a burnt coffee pot, a large metallic hot pot filled with barley tea, and a cash register. Behind it, a glass case displays Snickers, 7-Up, Coke and Marlboros – the snack bar.

Since you only play if you pay, the Wonjang-neem spends a lot of time setting up games. The official fee for a day and night of unlimited play is six bucks – that's what goes to the house. Then there's the unofficial fee – the money that changes hands between players.

"A Baduk player's lifeblood is gambling," the Wonjang-neem says in a hushed tone. Behind him, next to the cash register, there's a sign that says in bold red letters, "State Law No Gambling Allowed."

Of course, he's not talking about this club, the Wonjang-neem says, smiling. He's just telling me what he did during his years in Brazil. The Wonjang-neem smiles a lot, and when he does, he shows all his teeth *and*

gums. But he's no Buckwheat – like Jack Nicholson's, there's always something behind his grin.

"No, what kind of work did you do in Brazil?" I ask. "Job," I add in English for clarification.

"A good Baduk player doesn't need to worry about money," he says, holding a smile so wide that his eyes almost disappear. End of story.

Depending on how you keep count, the Wonjang-neem is on his fourth life. There's his life in Korea, where he graduated from a prestigious university. In 1967 he emigrated to Manhattan, where he got an accounting degree at NYU and worked as a CPA. During his 20-plus years there, he won a national Go championship, raised three kids in Westchester and sent two of them to Ivy League schools. With his kids grown up, he took an early-retirement package and abandoned the straight life to play Go in the clubs of Brazil. Though he's still married, it's unclear how much of a role his wife plays in life number four – which is essentially being lived at the club, where you're bound to find him anytime, day or night.

"Why do you record him?" interrupts Fujino, a Japanese-American man playing in front of us.

"He's from Osaka," the Wonjang-neem tells me.

"What?" asks Fujino.

"Fujino-san, you are from Osaka, yes?" the Wonjang-neem repeats in English.

Yes, Fujino nods. He's playing with a Korean man who doesn't speak any English, and Fujino doesn't speak Korean. But in Go the language barrier doesn't keep you from getting to know a person.

"Playing a game is like living one year together," Fujino explains upon losing. "Nineteen by 19 lines is 361 [points]. One year of the lunar calendar is 361 days. And then there are four corners for the four seasons. The center is heaven, or the sky. The edges are the ground. The black stones represent night and white represents day.

"So, like spending one year together, we can understand each other's character. We can see whether the character is very aggressive, very prudent, or reckless like me. Even when I think it over, I always make a mistake like this –" He points to a group of stones, dead now, that he failed to protect, an error that a player of his experience shouldn't have made.

Fujino is "about 50" and was an English teacher in Japan, which accounts for his near-perfect command of the language. His dark eyes and mustache give definition to his hollow face, and his standard outfit is a frayed, long-sleeved, sky-blue polo shirt tucked into brand-new blue Levi's. Fujino worked as a reporter for the *Rafu Shimpo*, a Japanese-American newspaper in J-town, for five of his eight years in L.A. Now he's in the process of writing his first novel, but that's not why he left the paper.

"In this game you always have to reflect on yourself," he says by way of explaining why he lost his taste for journalism. Like a good fiction writer, Fujino's obsessions – namely, Go – inform the narrative of his life. "In Japan we have a saying: The foot of lightning is always dark. People cannot see the bad things about themselves, even though it's very obvious to other persons. In this game, if you make a mistake you have to face it. If you have a weakness it comes out here, and you must learn to face it. That's the weak point of journalism. Journalists report a lot of crime and scandal, but they do it without ever reflecting on themselves." For the past 30 years, Fujino has played in Go clubs all over L.A., Japan and New York. This has taught him quite a bit about how different cultures approach the game and, by extension, life.

"Japanese are like samurais – they strive for beautiful style. Chinese players go for benefit. Koreans are very good at fighting, like boxers . . . I sometimes feel that if North and South merge, Koreans might start fighting both the East *and* West," says Fujino.

"And Americans are very orthodox," chimes in Choi, an acquaintance of Fujino who's taken a seat across from us. Choi is 52 years old and runs a liquor store up the street. He cuts out of work three times a week to play at the club. "They play by the book. There are basic rules of how you place the first stone, then two stones. I didn't learn those rules. I learned it by direct playing. I fight by my mind and heart, not the rules. Not Americans – so when a battle begins, they are not good fighters."

Fujino and Choi laugh.

"Go is good for your brain, but the bad part is people spend a lot of time here," Choi says. "They sit here all day and night. I used to do that when I first learned. I started at about 10 o'clock in the morning and left at 8 or 9 at night."

"It's like when you fall in love and people say, 'How come they spend so much time together?'" Fujino explains as Choi nods.

"There's a story in Japan that took place when there were still houses of Go," Fujino continues. "The Master was challenged by another house that wanted to take over his job and position. So the Fujiwara government ordered that the two houses play. The Master sent one of his students and ordered him to win. The student did his best, but he lost the game. Two weeks later he died. He played the game with all his life. That's why in

Japan we call Go 'the bloody game.'"

Blood, fights to the death, even the mathematical pursuit of the perfect game are all elements in the romantic plot line that surrounds Go, and, for that matter, almost any game that requires artistry. But in everyday life, the stories are more mundane, or just plain depressing.

"This place is not good for me . . . In Baduk I got improved, but in life I got fucked up," David tells me as soon as we're introduced. David is younger than most of the men at the club, and he also takes more time in putting himself together. His hair is stylishly spiky, and his light-brown eyes look almost hazel in the afternoon sun. David has a lot of woes, and with the Wonjang-neem by my side, he spills them like a barfly to a bartender.

"Sometimes I play 48 hours nonstop . . . Somewhat, every game I play is addictive, but this game is one of the most dangerous. It's the most intelligent, it's moment-to-moment excitement. If you're used to getting excitement every moment like in this game, and you don't get excitement in your life, you get very bored. It's like gambling, this game." He pauses to stare out the window, something he does quite often.

"I don't have enough money to retire, but I decided to retire. What the hell? No woman, no money." David is 41 years old and divorced. It doesn't take long to figure out that at the club, "retire" is a euphemism for quitting or losing one's job to play Go full time.

No children?

"I have children, but . . ." His voice trails off, and again he looks out the window, past the parking lot and over "Dentista" Ana Guevara's office to where the Wiltern is being engulfed by the shadow of a large, white office building.

"Everybody's bum. Dying slowly. And betting little money and getting very excited," David comments about two brawling players. "Older than 60, those people, I understand they have time. People like me, 40, 50, they are supposed to be working. It's 3 o'clock!" he says in mock surprise. Then he stares at the Wonjang-neem.

"I have no responsibility, my kids are grown," the Wonjang-neem says a little defensively. "My wife, she wants me to play."

David gives him a prolonged look of resignation and continues: "Here, you'll find the bottom standard of life, because they have nothing. Garbage in, garbage out. They're not working . . . they're addicted, and right now I'm one of them."

There was a time when David didn't have the Go monkey on his back. He emigrated to the States 18 years ago, and before "retiring" he was a CPA in Koreatown. He had his own practice and a secretary. In the happier days of his marriage, David only played at the club once a week. When things started to heat up at home, David cooled off at the club.

"Of course, I learned the basic rules of this game when I was young. But I really started playing when I had problems with my wife – my ex-wife. After a little argument or fighting, I would go to a bar and come home late. After the war she asks me, 'Where did you go that night?'

"If I say, 'I went to the bar and drank,' then she gets upset and a new fight starts. As you know, at a lot of Korean bars there are hostesses. I understand that, so I came to this place. She knew there's no women and no possibility for her to get jealous. It was my territory after the battle," he says, intentionally punny for the Wonjang-neem. They share a laugh.

Despite the fact that he wants to remarry, David's still single. He freely admits that he needs a woman to "baby sit" him. When he's with a woman, he says, he's "reasonably healthy."

"I divorced at the age of 32. I think then that I'm young and attractive enough to marry a young and attractive woman. But eight years have passed and nothing . . . After I divorced, I don't have anyone to control me, so I play very heavily. Now who's going to marry me? I play Baduk all the time, and I'm not doing anything for my future."

"He gambles with the 'spending money' his children give him," the Wonjang-neem says, pointing to Grandpa Um – a short, almost bald, owl-like-looking man. "Sometimes when he runs out of money, he calls his daughter – she lives in a big house nearby – and she'll bring him more." That Grandpa Um can gamble away his spending money is met with admiration, not disapproval. Only the lucky parents, who have raised successful kids, receive spending money.

"Would you stop smiling, it makes me feel bad," whines Grandpa Young to Grandpa Um as he lays his stones. They've been partners for over four years. It's another weekday afternoon at the Gi Won, and their game's almost finished. Grandpa Young has lost all hope of winning; he's just trying to minimize his losses.

Grandpa Young stands almost 6 feet tall and has a long, statesmanlike face. At 77, he's five years older than Grandpa Um. He splits his weeks between the club and the National Asian Pacific Center downtown, where he teaches English to senior citizens applying for U.S. citizenship.

"I learned English during the Korean War," Grandpa Young says in English.

"Interpreter," Grandpa Um chimes in.

"Yeah, that was 1950," continues Grandpa Young.

Again, Grandpa Um butts in, "At that time, he was –"

"Just a minute! When I talk, you shut up!" Grandpa Young yells.

"I explain for you," Grandpa Um says, ignoring him.

"No, I can explain myself, I don't need your help . . . During the Korean War, the North Korean army attacked Seoul, and so everybody moved south. I was in college in SuWon, so I run out. Then they picked me up and put me in the army . . .

"I know that as a private, I'm nothing but bullet target . . . One day I read a flier, it said, 'We need interpreters who can speak a little English.' I applied and they took me in the U.S. Army as an interpreter. Two months later, they gave me" – he draws stripes on his shoulders – "and made me second lieutenant.

"So now I need to learn how to speak the English language or else I'm in big trouble. In the beginning, it was very difficult to follow the American-style dialogue. So I asked my boss, a major, 'I need a favor.' I ask him to write everything. Within three months I improved a lot, because otherwise I get killed," he says, laughing.

"Four years ago, my daughter said, 'Come live with me, because I have kids and my husband is always working in Korea. I need your help.' So I did. She got me a green card. But I like Americans now. They take care of old people . . . So we come here to have fun and killing time – no-where to go. We go all over the place, it cost money, so this is better."

Even when you bet?

"Oh yeah, we bet," Grandpa Um pipes up.

"No, we don't bet!" Grandpa Young yells. "Don't write that – the police will come," he orders. "We say 'donation.'"

They laugh.

"Nobody takes money home," Grandpa Young assures me. "If he wins, we go by drink house and maybe have a beer."

"He's crazy for the drink," gibes Grandpa Um.

"What! Wait a minute. You shut up!" Grandpa Young says in a flawless GI accent.

Later, downstairs at the sushi bar, it becomes obvious that it's actually Grandpa Um who's crazy for the drink. Being crazy for the drink at 4:30 p.m. is something only old men can do without much reproach. At the club, they can also get away with throwing stones at each other and storming out after losing, only to return the next day as if nothing happened. They do it with such tongue-in-cheek zeal that it's clear they're playing out their roles as old men, and at the club – and really in all of Koreatown – their shtick is understood and accepted.

When I walk into the sushi bar – a space that fits about five tables – Grandpa Um, Young and the third musketeer, Grandpa Paik, are singing Japanese folk songs for Fujino, their captive audience. Though they were forced to learn these songs as boys during Japan's colonization of Korea, they sing them without a hint of irony. In fact, here, as in the club, they sing more than they talk.

"We're old and have known each other for a long time – what do we have to talk about? So we sing," explains Grandpa Paik before breaking into "Row, Row, Row Your Boat." A song in English for me.

"Be-ing-uh Kuh-roh-juh-be sang that song," Grandpa Paik says wistfully. "Now that was one stylish guy."

Grandpa Paik works his rugged appeal. He wears his white hair in a crew cut, and he's dressed in a gray-plaid flannel shirt and khakis. He's got a certain outdated, unabashed and charismatic confidence – Hong Kong movie star Jordan Chan as an old man.

"You know, after a couple of drinks, we start to feel good. Then we catch the bus to go home. If it's not too crowded, we sit together and watch all the women come onboard. 'Oh, she's a little large,' we might say. Or 'That one's too skinny.' But every once in a while a beautiful woman comes onboard . . ." He pauses, as if savoring the image.

"What the hell?" Grandpa Young shouts, and then apologizes to me for cursing.

"She may be a young woman, but she's also a reporter," Grandpa Paik says matter-of-factly in Korean.

"Not her. What about your wife? She get angry if she hear you."

"He's upset because his wife died several months ago," Grandpa Paik says to me seriously.

"Yes, three months ago. He knows my pain."

The discussion ends as abruptly as it began when the waitress, a slender young girl with long, black hair, serves round two – mugs of warm sake and beer. Grandpa Paik stiffly slaps her shoulder and says, "You forgot the glasses."

"Thank you, honey," says Grandpa Young.

Grandpa Paik, who has lived in the States for more than 10 years, tells me that before he retired he was a chemist who did the coloring for the faces of expensive watches, mostly Rolexes. His dream, however, was to be a boxer, and he might have made it if it hadn't been for the war. While trying to make it as a boxer, he also worked a day job as a movie commentator.

Movie commentator?

"Back then, movies didn't have sound. And they were black-and-white. So the theaters would hire a movie commentator. I would sit off to the side and read a script by a tiny light. The trick was reading in time."

He clears his throat to do his commentator voice, which sounds something like a TV anchor on speed. "'And then, the man arrived to the city looking for the woman he loved . . . ' But if the man wasn't on the screen yet, then everybody would start yelling."

They also jeered when the film broke, which it always did back then. "And they'd always re-thread it upside down. So I'd read, 'The plane flew upside down over the clouds and below the land,' and this got really big laughs. But nobody would think that was funny these days. You understand," he says to Grandpa Young, who nods. "But back then, it was so funny the whole theater would be laughing."

Grandpa Paik's story still gets a big laugh from his friends, and it becomes clear that the men of the Na Sung Hangook Gi Won have re-created some of that "back then" in the here and now of this worn-down strip mall. It's a universal "back then," when every community had a Gi Won – where, more than their words, men were understood by the number of times their eight ball made it into the corner pocket, how many mugs of sake or beer they could drink before passing out, and how they played their stones. What is Go? What drives Go players? From the beginning, the men ignored this line of questioning. Some because they knew better, and most because they didn't give a damn.

After a third round of sake, the grandpas make their way back upstairs, where they can sing, shoot the shit, talk about broads and be left alone. With nothing left to prove and no need to justify their time, they've distilled the game to its purest form – a refuge.

LA Weekly, March 12 - 18, 1999

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